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New Man in Town

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EVERYBODY comes to New York sooner or later. Among the fairly recent arrivals is a fifty-year-old, non-stop-talking crusader named Robert Pickus, a founder, the president, and the main spokesman of an organization called the World Without War Council. We met Mr. Pickus at his newly established headquarters, on top of the Flatiron Building. "We're a very independent outfit—a sport in the peace-organization jungle—so these quarters seemed sort of right for us," he said. "Although we have a foot in the U.N.-oriented camp, it would strike a false note for us to be over near First Avenue, and it would be equally wrong for us to be down in SoHo with the peace-cause groups. Our criticism of the conventional peace movement has been almost as sharp as our criticism of the balance-of-power people. Besides, the rent's cheap, because we don't have any water in this penthouse and, as you may have noticed, you have to climb thirty-eight steps to get here."

While we were still catching our breath, Mr. Pickus went on to say that the Council has been in existence since 1967, and until fairly recently was principally based in Berkeley, California, where he lives, with his wife and children. He is currently a trans-continental commuter, after a fashion, coming East every month or so for a ten-day stretch. "I've been in peace practically my entire adult life," he said, "but I'd never wanted to come to New York before, because that's where nearly every other group has its mimeograph machines. I wanted to concentrate on regional work, in places like Seattle, and like Oakland, where we've been able to have a demonstrable impact on groups such as the Episcopal Diocese of California. We're a minimalist organization trying to function as a catalyst in a field where most people regard the primary goal as something that isn't feasible. Do you know that there have been more than a hundred wars since 1945? We have a list that was drawn up by a Hungarian peace researcher, except that he left out the invasion of Hungary—which is characteristic of what we're up against. One of our megalomaniacal goals is to try to link up all the people active in the peace field—church groups, labor, the underground world—and to get each group to put the ending of wars on its

permanent long-range agenda and take it *seriously*. Our claim is that with suitable perspectives we can develop some common thought among the pacifists and the world-law crowd and the disarmament people and other groups, like psychiatrists, who are examining war and peace in the larger sense, from the point of view of man himself. Up to now, the farther we've stayed from New York, the easier it has seemed to pull different groups together."

Mr. Pickus, who might have a Ph.D. in political science if his dissertation were not twenty-odd years overdue, told us that he has led a reasonably peripatetic life: born in Sioux City, raised in Illinois, educated in Chicago and London, war service—chiefly with the O.S.S.—in Sweden. "In Stockholm, it made an enormous impression on me to be thrown together with one ethically centered refugee after another—men for whom the likelihood of failure was an integral part of existence but who nonetheless clung to a belief in the importance of persisting in their ideals," he said. "In 1951, I looked around for a place that would feed me while I tried to end all wars, and I went to work for the Quakers, but I left, because I felt they had inadequate political understanding. In 1961, Robert Gilmore and I started an organization called Turn Toward Peace, which was supposed to be a clearinghouse for sixty or so groups. But Vietnam soon intruded and began to eclipse every other issue. We in the peace movement may have to pay a terrible price for some fundamental moral and political errors we made during that war. Too many peace workers propagated the notion that the only bad thing about Vietnam was American power, and that Hanoi, for instance, couldn't be blamed for *anything*. How can you keep telling people that their country is uniquely corrupt, vicious, and exploitative, and then hope to get them to move in concert with the rest of the world? I'm a pacifist, but I seem to spend too much of my time these days arguing with my pacifist brethren. Right now, we're hung up on amnesty, which I'm afraid is beginning to prolong the polarization caused by the war. Our view of men who left the country rather than take the consequences of being conscientious objectors is that while conscience is naturally of value, so is law, and individuals just can't be permitted to walk in and out of political systems as *they* choose. We in the

Council generally favor bringing people home in some way that won't rupture the delicate connective elements of society—perhaps by offering them amnesty but with an alternative service requirement. A lot of peace people disagree with us on that. The left feels that we're selling out, and the right thinks that we're either dangerous or idiotic, and the middle doesn't seem to be able to grasp what we're talking about. Still, we have to push on, and I hope to be able to link up some of the energy left over from Vietnam to find committed leadership for peace, to bind that together, to relate it to all segments of the community, and to rebuild whatever it is that people in this country need to make them tackle large challenges. Well, we've stayed away from New York all along, and have kept pure, I suppose, getting by with small sums of money and young volunteers. But we haven't accomplished enough. So now we're here in the mainstream, and I just hope we don't become like many East Coast organizations and devote most of our time to raising enough money simply to stay in business. That would be bad for, among other things, my pride, and it's been my pride that's kept me going. If you think your energies and abilities are worth anything, you want a task that's really big. Mine feels a little bit too big to me right now."